

Comfrey: the Permaculture Star



Comfrey is queen in a permaculture garden. This multifunctional, prolific, and low-maintenance herb performs so many jobs in the garden that it truly stands out. Its flowers attract pollinators and other helpful insects. Its large leaves shade the soil and provide habitat for beneficial critters. Comfrey is also one of the most potent and effective medicinal herbs.

Comfrey is famous for harvesting nutrients from the soil and accumulating generous quantities of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium, calcium, silica, iron, and B₁₂ in its leaves. It's also fast-growing and provides a lot of biomass when used as mulch or fertilizer to build soil quickly while feeding beneficial soil organisms.

Comfrey plants are propagated by root division. You need only a little chunk of root to have a new plant. The plant is persistent where you plant it but will stay within bounds. If you want to get rid of it, you need to first dig out what you can and then put a deep sheet mulch over the area to block light.

Bocking 14 is the only variety you should plant in a garden, as it's less invasive than other types. Bocking 14 won't send out creeping roots but will resprout from just a small piece of root if you transplant it.

Here are some of the things you can do with comfrey:

Mulch

Comfrey grows big leaves that help deliver more organic matter to your soil. Mulching with comfrey will feed your soil (a "green manure"), help retain moisture, and protect beneficial soil organisms. Just *chop and drop*: cut back the plant to the ground and lay the leaves and stems around your nearby plants. You can cut comfrey right back to the ground two to three times each year, and it will keep coming back.

Grow comfrey underneath perennial edibles such as fruit trees. You can then chop and drop the comfrey to feed the fruit trees, or pick up the cuttings and take them to the vegetable garden.

Fertilize

Comfrey mulch is a slow-release fertilizer. When planting, put a few leaves in the bottom of the planting hole. The comfrey leaves will break down, releasing nutrients to the plant over time.

If you dry comfrey, the powder can be used in your early spring garden before comfrey plants have woken up and produced leaves. The powdered comfrey decomposes more readily than fresh leaves, which is better for the spring garden.

Comfrey tea provides an immediate nutrient boost to established plants. You can make comfrey tea as follows:

1. Fill a 5-gallon bucket halfway with fresh comfrey cuttings.
2. Cover with unchlorinated water, so the bucket is $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Cover and steep for 2 weeks.
3. Strain off the liquid. You can compost the comfrey cuttings.
4. Dilute the tea, from 1:3 up to 1:10, tea to water.
5. Spray as a foliar feed or use as a soil drench.

Comfrey tea can help overall growth and encourage better flowering and more vigorous fruit or vegetable production. Research indicates that it also can be used to prevent powdery mildew.

Heal

Comfrey can be dried and powdered to make a healing salve for cuts and wounds, scrapes, bites, bruises, and sore joints. Dry cuttings in a dehydrator, remove the dried leaves from the stems, and then use a blender or coffee grinder to make a leaf powder. Store in an air-tight container. This is a condensed and potent form of comfrey, so a little goes a long way. Look up a recipe for amounts.

Activate Compost

Comfrey's high levels of nitrogen activate compost and help break down the organic material more quickly. Add comfrey cuttings to your compost pile to balance out carbon sources like leaves or straw. Add the comfrey throughout the pile, rather than in a single layer, to get the maximum and quickest benefit.

Grow some near the compost pile so you can add a few leaves every time you add material to the compost. This will give you compost with more nutrients to later spread around plants and incorporate into the soil.

Attract Beneficial Insects and Increase Biodiversity

The bell-shaped spring flowers attract bees and other pollinators. Pest predators such as spiders, lacewings, and parasitoid wasps will hunt on and around comfrey. It's best to leave some plants alone in order to sustain pest/predator relationships. Lacewings are said to lay eggs on comfrey, and spiders overwinter on the plant.

